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SUBJECT: MFA: DON'T DESIGNATE VIETNAM CPC

Reftels: A. HCMC 1140 B. Hanoi 2398 C. 03 Hanoi 2897 D. Hanoi 2438

1. (U) Summary: The GVN characterizes the release of nine prisoners of concern under the National Day amnesty, the recognition of 25 evangelical protestant churches in the Central Highlands, the pending recognition of five more by the end of the year, and the accommodating treatment of SFRC staffer Frank Jannuzi during his visit to the Central Highlands as "significant efforts" that should mitigate against a CPC designation. The GVN further warns that designating Vietnam a country of particular concern for religious freedom will cause "grave disappointment" for Vietnamese leaders, "seriously hurt" the Vietnamese people, and "create problems" in our bilateral relationship. End Summary.

2. (U) Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director General of the Americas Department Nguyen Duc Hung called in the DCM September 13 to describe Vietnam's progress on religious freedom issues. He noted that the visit of Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Frank Jannuzi to the Central Highlands (Ref A) - on Vietnamese National Day - was a success thanks to the effort of the local authorities to accommodate Jannuzi's scheduling needs. In addition, AFM Hung said, the National Day amnesty of prisoners (Ref B) had included nine names from the list of prisoners of concern provided to the GVN by Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Hanford during his visit to Vietnam October 22-24, 2003 (Ref C). Finally, Hung noted that authorities in the Central Highlands had recognized and given freedom to worship to 25 "chapters" of the Southern Evangelical Protestant Church to date, adding that five more chapters were under consideration for recognition by the end of the year.

3. (U) Hung said that the GVN had heard from the SRV Embassy in Washington that the CPC designations would be announced "Wednesday or Thursday" (September 15 or 16). If Vietnam were on that list despite taking the actions Hung had listed, it would "cause grave disappointment to Vietnamese leaders, seriously hurt the Vietnamese people, and could create problems in our bilateral relations," Hung warned.

4. (U) The DCM noted that the U.S.-Vietnam relationship was much broader than the single issue of religious freedom, but stressed that Vietnam could strengthen its case by allowing more visits by more groups, including official delegations and religious organizations, as well as permitting developmental agencies and NGOs free access to the Central Highlands. Hung said that while he personally fully understood the domestic political considerations in the United States that affected official actions on the human rights and religious freedom issues, the United States also needed to understand that these problems were fundamentally related to economic and social development and thus moved at a slower pace than the U.S. political cycle. Focusing this way on religious freedom "elevates a secondary issue to main-point status" without taking into account cultural differences, Hung said. "A solution will require dialogue and an approach that is based on mutual respect, not imposition of one side's point of view and timetable," he added. "The United States needs to pay more attention to the psychology of Asia. The relationship is multi-faceted, but the people of Vietnam are willing to give it all up if their concerns are not respected."

5. (SBU) Comment: The positive treatment given to Staffdel Jannuzi and the news of the potential opening of five new churches in the Central Highlands were indeed welcome. We were less impressed with the amnesty, however, which was more a repackaging of previous releases than an actual response to Ambassador Hanford.

6. (SBU) Comment continued: More significantly, while the GVN, in its earlier dealings with the United States, had seemed to have "factored in" CPC

designation, recent developments may have changed this equation. As Ambassador Burhgardt noted in his farewell message (Ref D), jockeying for power in advance of the Tenth Party Congress is already intense. Our moderate and forward-looking interlocutors have shown some concern that hardline and nationalist factions in the CPV will use the CPC designation as "proof" of the USG's efforts to foster political change in Vietnam by pushing "foreign" religions and values.

MARINE